



# Australian Bureau of Statistics

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### Feature Article - Theatre Royal, Hobart

**Contributed by Andrew Ross, Theatre Royal**

The Theatre Royal was commenced in 1834, after local businessmen decided the growing colony required a permanent theatre, and opened in 1837. Located in the Wapping district, an unpleasant area of slums and industry, the theatre, originally a much smaller structure than the theatre of today, incorporated a tavern in its basement. This was closed after only a few years, apparently because the rowdiness of the tavern patrons was too much of a distraction for the theatre audiences.

The theatre was extensively rebuilt in the early 1900s, when the elaborate plasterwork proscenium, dome with its portraits of poets and composers and lead crystal chandelier were added. The port of Hobart was on major global shipping routes, and during the late part of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries, the theatre hosted many international artists and companies, who often played at the theatre for weeks at a time on their way around the world. However shipping routes changed and with other forms of entertainment becoming available, performances and attendances dropped off. By the late 1940s, the theatre had fallen into disuse and was threatened with demolition.

In 1948, the Old Vic Company toured to Hobart with Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh, who were in part responsible for motivating public opinion towards saving the theatre. A successful fundraising campaign enabled restoration. The building was purchased by the State of Tasmania, and the early 1950s witnessed the Theatre Royal's re-emergence as a major social centre in the city. This was to be crowned in 1952 by a visit from the-then Princess Elizabeth, but en route to Australia, she was called back to England to become Queen following the death of George VI. Nonetheless, the number of productions increased and a resident company even offered subscription seasons.

More work in the 1970s modernised the backstage facilities and created space that was, in the mid-1980s, to become the Backspace Theatre, a popular and affordable performance space for cabaret and smaller local companies. In 1984, the auditorium was again renovated, this time to return its colour to the deep burgundy of the early 1900s. The work was almost complete when disaster struck and the theatre was extensively damaged by fire. The future looked grim, but again the generosity of the public, corporate donors and the State Government ensured that Australia's grand old lady of the theatre world was saved.

In recent years, the theatre has resumed its pre-eminent position in Hobart's social life, thanks in part to government policies encouraging national touring of quality theatre shows. In 1994, a subscription season was successfully re-introduced, and the years since have seen both the number of performances and overall attendances increase steadily. Technology, too, has made its mark on the Theatre Royal, with computerisation of the lighting control system, and in 1994 the installation of a computerised ticketing system. The Theatre Royal also boasts its own Internet site.

The Wapping area is now being revitalised with the construction of inner-city housing, and it is hoped that this development will reinforce the role played by the "The Royal" in Hobart's theatre culture.

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